

Calls on colleagues to sign letter urging Secretary Clinton to label Vietnam a “Country of Particular Concern” for abusing religious freedom

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez (CA-47) and a bipartisan coalition of lawmakers today called on their Congressional colleagues to sign a letter urging the State Department to re-designate Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for its egregious abuses of religious freedom. The letter, which has been signed by Reps. Chris Smith (R-NJ), Zoe Lofgren (D-CA), Joseph Cao (R-LA), and Ed Royce (R-CA), highlights a string of incidents in which religious leaders and activists were persecuted for their beliefs.

“My colleagues in the Congressional Vietnam Caucus and I are urging Secretary Clinton to take concrete action to hold Vietnam accountable for its severe abuses of religious freedom,” said Rep. Sanchez, who is Co-Chair of the Caucus. “Vietnam has shown a complete disregard for the rights of its citizens, actively suppressing religious activity and persecuting people of faith. It’s time for our country to actually penalize these abuses and place Vietnam back on the State Department’s ‘Countries of Particular Concern’ list.”

A copy of the letter, which was released earlier today, can be found below. Members of the public are encouraged to call their U.S. Representatives to express their support for Rep. Sanchez’s letter:

Dear Secretary Clinton:

We write today to respectfully request that you take a meaningful step to help advance religious freedom and related human rights in Vietnam by re-designating Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the *International Religious Freedom Act of 1998*. It is encouraging that the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi has publicly condemned recent arrests, detentions, and acts of violence that “contradict Vietnam’s own commitment to internationally accepted standards of human rights and the rule of law.” Unfortunately Vietnam’s oppression of its citizens, particularly over the last year, continues to demonstrate that public statements of concern are simply not enough.

We believe that the CPC designation is a powerful and effective tool to both spotlight abuses of religious freedom and to encourage specific improvement. When Vietnam was designated a CPC in the past, it did not hinder advancement on other bilateral interests, but led to real improvements on a number of critical human rights concerns. In addition, protecting and promoting religious freedom is a core American value and essential to the success of many of our global interests.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), Human Rights Watch, and other organizations have provided credible evidence of severe and ongoing religious freedom violations in Vietnam, including the active suppression of independent religious activity, forced renunciations of faith, the expulsion of monks and nuns and effective disbandment of the order associated with the renowned Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, and the jailing of religious freedom activists such as Father Nguyen Van Ly, and the human rights lawyers Le Cong Dinh and Nguyen Van Dai.

Additionally, the imprisonment of hundreds of Montagnard Christians and the ongoing arrests and harsh repression of Montagnards belonging to independent house churches is another indication that pressure must be brought to bear on the Vietnamese government. These issues are serious and indicate that Vietnam's religious freedom situation warrants more concerted diplomatic action.

We cannot allow Vietnam's continued backsliding on human rights and related rule of law issues to continue with minimal reaction from the United States. Working to guarantee internationally recognized freedoms is in the interest of the American people, the Vietnamese people and future success of U.S.-Vietnam relations.

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